

REPRESENTATION OF PARTITION IN HINDI FILMS OF THE NEHRUVIAN ERA

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ABSTRACT: *Partition has been one of the most defining episodes in the life of Modern India. Yet, we find that for many decades, much less insistence was paid to understand the human element associated with it. In the Nehruvian era, we find that Partition being still fresh in the memories of the people and being such a sensitive topic, discussions on it were neither welcomed by the State nor the people themselves. The project of Nation building was in the main focus, which essentially also meant that such traumatic events as Partition needed to be forgotten. Cinema, being a popular medium of entertainment, was also expected to contribute its fair share in the same process. However, Cinema never became completely subservient to the whims of the State. Talking about Hindi Cinema, in particular, we find that it always tried to strike a balance between the official narrative over issues and the realities of the time. It is in this context that we try to understand how Hindi films of the Nehruvian era dealt with the issue of Partition.*

KEYWORDS: *Partition, Hindi Cinema, Nehruvian era, trauma, women's question.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema, arguably, has been one of the most dominant forms of media, right from its introduction in the late 19th century. It has this incomparable quality to appeal and captivate the human senses, which also leads to it being one of the most popular forms of entertainment among the masses. India is privileged to have been one of the earliest countries where motion pictures were publicly shown, when on July 7, 1896, Marius Sestier, a representative of the Paris based Lumière brothers, presented the first 'cinematographe' show at the Watson's Hotel in Bombay, a few months after its premiere showing in Paris¹. Though we have plenty of regional film industries, many of them being success stories in their own right, it is Hindi Cinema which is the biggest among them and also the one which may be considered to be closest to the idea of a National Cinema that we have in India. Being *du jor* among its viewers from the beginning itself, it has also been subjected to maximum scrutiny. Though this enthusiasm of the plebian masses was not shared by the elite sections of the society, who looked down upon it as something having a debasing quality and a polluting influence upon the people². Even the contemporary national movement led by the Indian National Congress (INC) never tried to appropriate it as a part of its programme. Answering a questionnaire sent to him by the Indian Cinematograph Committee of 1927, Mahatma Gandhi described it as a 'sinful technology'³. Some others like J.L. Nehru who although appreciative of the new medium still believed that the industry needed to raise its standards so as to deter from making films just for entertainment purposes and focus more in terms of meeting good standards; and of aiming at producing high class films which have educational and social values⁴. Reasonably so, the early Hindi films lunched between these definite contours set for them.

NEHRUVIAN ERA AND HINDI FILMS ON PARTITION

State control over Indian Cinema in general and over Hindi films in particular, continued unabated in the post-independence era. Cinema was expected to promote Nation building, patriotism and brotherhood among the

people. To ensure that these ideals were being upheld and preserved, the State took upon itself the responsibility of being the watchdog. Various methods were envisioned for this purpose- censorship (carrying much of the colonial legacy in this regard), taxation, allocation of raw materials, and control over exhibition through the licensing of theatres and setting up of various commissions and other regular enquiries such as the 1951 Film Enquiry Committee, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Film Seminar of 1955, the Khosla Committee on Film Censorship in 1968, the Symposium on Cinema in Developing Countries in 1979, the Working Group on National Film Policy in 1980 and the National Conference on Challenges before Indian Cinema in 1998⁵.

Partition being such an important issue, it was bound to attract the attention of filmmakers. So understandably, we have films in India that deal with the issue of Partition. However, the number is quite meagre when one takes into account the enormity of the issue itself. Over the years, it has seen its own share of ups and downs. In Bengali cinema, Ritwik Ghatak (*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Subarnarekha* (1965)) and others prominently took upon the issue and produced some rare jewels. Similar attempts have been made in Punjabi cinema as well. In the case of the Hindi film industry, we witness a transition from a period of disquiet to a more active engagement later on. In the period post-Partition, it was grappled with an uneasy reluctance and angst, which at first instance might look quite strange, considering the fact that many people associated with the industry like Dalsukh M Pancholi, Om Prakash, Chopra brothers (B.R Chopra and Yash Chopra), Anand brothers and many others moved from Lahore to Bombay (Lahore being a popular centre of filmmaking before Partition). All of Lahore's three big studios- Shorey, Pancholi, and Leela Mandir- closed down and their Hindu producers moved to Bombay with various unfinished projects. Migrations from Calcutta included names like Bimal Roy and Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Migration to Pakistan included illustrious names like Noor Jehan and Saadat Hasan Manto⁶. Apart from those directly affected, others who were associated with the industry of that time would also have heard about tragic stories, witnessed the violence being unfolded in the streets themselves. Yet we find that in many films of the early years after 1947, reference to Partition was generally made for establishing characters' backgrounds and coordinates alone⁷. It appears that leaving out a few hesitant attempts, the Hindi filmmakers generally ignored the issue as such. One reason for this anxiety has been explained in terms of the 'shock value' which all and sundry felt in the aftermath of Partition. People didn't want to remember those heinous days again. The collective loss and trauma were so much that people preferred to ignore it and somehow move on with their lives⁸. Moreover, harsh experiences faced by these filmmakers also strengthened their resolve to give their contribution for the betterment, growth and cultural enrichment of the newborn Nation⁹. But the other reason which has been brought to the forefront is that the state restrained the filmmakers from venturing into such controversial areas. The fractured independence had brought with it its own share of problems. First and foremost was the daunting challenge to ensure that the recently won freedom may not be lost again in face of various fissiparous tendencies which were actively working against India and to protect its integrity. The doomsday philosophers and the nay-sayers were quite active during that time and the environment was rife with speculations and rumours about the future of the nascent Nation. Then there were problems of acute poverty, starvation, hunger, lack of capital, communalism, lack of industrialization etcetera which had to be addressed. In short, India had to be made a Nation with the help of worn-out tools. In the years following independence, Indian cinema was also caught up in this collective endeavour of nation building, offering narratives that negotiated the challenges and choices facing its public. The 'popular modernism' in the case of Indian cinema involved incorporating a range of artistic innovations alongside vernacular aesthetic norms. It tried to fashion out a vernacular film language at once accessible to the public and which was able to mediate the mutations of national life¹⁰.

Though helping to popularise the dominant sentiment of Nation building in general, Cinema was never a total and committed mouthpiece of the government as such. The popular Hindi Cinema negotiated a level in the course of time where it many a time even seemed to undermine the official discourse by presenting parallel narratives. The most important tool used by filmmakers for this purpose was indirect referencing or what Sumita Chakravarty calls as 'the art of impersonation'¹¹. They devised figurations for referencing the contingent experience by mining traditional cultural symbols, including epics and religious texts, classical Sanskrit dramaturgy, folk theatre and oral traditions¹². On a closer reading, one can find that Partition and its trauma was referred to in indirect terms even in the films which do not directly deal with the issue as such. Partition being one the most catastrophic markers of recent memory set a sombre tone for the whole of the 'Golden era' of the Indian Cinema. It would thus not be wrong to contend that even during the relative period of disquiet for three decades following Partition, the 'silence' was never complete; it was interspersed with notable films. In order to grasp the essence of these films, let's discuss some of the major themes touched by them over the years.

VIOLENCE

Partition was marked by genocidal violence of unprecedented range. Even according to minimalist estimates, roughly a million people lost their lives¹³. The general tendency whether of the governments or the communities involved has been of explaining it in terms of 'us' versus 'them'¹⁴. Violence is always narrativized as something that happened 'there' and not 'here', 'They' are always the ones to be blamed for aggressing, for spoiling the peace; and whatever response came from 'our' side is explained as being necessary to protect ourselves. Well at the same time, we find that there is a dearth of discussions and debates regarding the effects of Partition violence on the psychological makeup of the survivors in the public sphere of the contemporary time, very likely due to the trauma which people felt after such devastating occurrences. Explaining the essence of trauma, Slavoj Žižek claims that it is too horrible to be remembered and to be integrated into our symbolic universe¹⁵. However, with time, things have changed for the better. For the last three to four decades, an increasing number of scholars have insisted that this vicious circle of blame game and amnesia leads us nowhere. They ask us to emphasise more on the humanistic element of such traumatic incidents, to look into the fact that how violence in itself becomes a language and how it goes on towards making the 'community' the subject of history¹⁶.

Early Hindi films of post Partition period tried to deal with the issue in a nuanced manner. They refrained from direct representation of violence on screen, which is quite understandable considering the sensibilities of the time and strict censorship regime of the period, but references were made either as part of storyline/ dialogues of characters or through indirect means such as sombre music, chaotic voices, stick figure shadows, spread of fire etcetera. At the same time, we find that these films tried to engage with the repercussions that the various violent incidents had upon the lives of the people. Instead of blaming individuals and communities, attempts were made to explain it in terms of rising communal frenzy and a twisted sense of morality prevailing at that time. A case in point would be **Dharam Putra (1961)** directed by Yash Chopra and produced by his elder brother B.R. Chopra. The film depicts Partition along with the subject of Hindu fundamentalism and the ambiguities arising in relations due to Partition. The film opens in Lahore in 1925 and shows deep bonding between two families of Nawab Badruddin and Gulshan Rai, who reside there. The Nawab's daughter, Husn Bano, has an affair with a young man named Javed and gets pregnant with his child, but her father does not approve of the relation as Javed is not of a similar social standing as his. It is in these circumstances that Gulshan Rai's son- Amrit Rai, who after his father's demise has now become the head of his family, decides to accept Bano's son as his own, saving Nawab and his family from facing any social ostracization. Later, however, unable to see her daughter's pitiable state,

Nawab agrees to marry Bano to Javed. As a simultaneous sub-plot, nationalistic fervour is shown cruising throughout Lahore in tune with the whole country, especially marked by amity and coordination between Hindus and Muslims. Nawab even sacrifices his life in the struggle against the authoritarian British regime. Here the story takes a skip of fifteen years. Javed and Bano who had moved to some foreign location returned back to Lahore in 1947 to find that the harmony between Hindus and Muslims had been replaced by general animosity between the two religious communities. They meet their son Dilip (played by Shashi Kapoor) who doesn't recognize them and has grown to be a staunch Hindu fanatic who professes such extreme views as of rooting the Muslims out of the country and goes as far as even trying to kill his Muslim neighbours (his actual parents) in the frenzy of riots. It is only when Husn divulges the secret that he actually is her and Javed's son that the world comes crashing upon him- implicated through a montage of scenes such as earthquakes, waves crashing on rocks, riot scenes, dead bodies, weeping children, refugees etcetera in rapid cuts¹⁷. The film later ends on a positive note with Dilip realizing his mistake and an impassioned plea of preserving communal harmony in the country and to understand that humanity is above all the religions; mixing it with real footage of Jawaharlal Nehru speaking from the Red Fort.

DISLOCATION AND LOSS OF IDENTITY

The lived reality of Partition victims is quite different in comparison to the official discourse of political truncation and blame game on it. People were forced to leave their own homelands behind and flee towards an unforeseeable future, many of them failing to reach safe places alive. Even those who survived were left to face the quandary of loss of identity¹⁸. They had to struggle in an altogether new world, where they were expected to forget who they originally were. Partition films tried to capture this shock by weaving the issue closely within their narrative and cinematic devices were used liberally to accentuate the effect it had upon the lives of the characters in particular and the society in general. **Lahore (1949)** tried to contextualize the popular theme of separated lovers within the framework of Partition. The film opens in the streets of Lahore. Chaman (Ajay Dewan) is in love with Leelo (Nargis) and they plan to marry. However, they are soon confounded by a series of problems. Chaman goes to Bombay in order to pursue his studies further and is thus separated from Leelo. Just as they are about to reunite, history intervenes: Partition takes place, riots erupt and families are torn apart overnight. The Partition scene of the film shows a montage of paper cuttings to implicate how it fell out of the blue over the lives of common people. The post-Partition segment shows camps and railway stations flooded with migrants. Risking his life, Chaman goes searching for Leelo and after much effort is able to locate her. She is shown to have been married to a Muslim man, much against her wishes. When Chaman is finally able to reunite with her and asks her to return back with him, she responds by saying that he should forget that she exists. She exclaims of having lost her identity, that the society would never accept a woman who has been defiled and that in trying to still bring her back, Chaman would end up blackening his own name. It is only after listening to a compassionate plea from Chaman that she agrees to return. Similarly, **Nastik (1954)** begins with a series of cuts of various Partition footage, shadow images of followers of various religions fighting with each other along with one of the most memorable songs of the decade- '*dekhteresansaar ki haalatkyahogayibhagwaan, kitnabadalgayainsaan*' (translated as Oh Lord! witness the state of your world, how much has the man changed over time!). We are introduced to a family of three remaining members- Anil (played by Ajit), his sister Kamla and younger brother Munna (the other members supposedly having either been estranged or dead in the Partition violence). They are shown to have been left completely shattered by the events, all vitality robbed out of their being, creating a sordid atmosphere at the behest itself. They try to gather the pieces of their torn life and begin it anew but find it really difficult to do so. Subsequently in the story, Anil loses both his brother and sister. Left in a state of distraught, he

becomes an atheist and vows to avenge their death- a stark contrast from his earlier life and views. The issue of identitylessness was not only limited to certain films as such but engulfed the mood of the earlier decades of the post-independence period. It was used reflexively or as a sub theme in many other films. For example, in another feature of the time- **Aag (1948)**, the protagonist Kewal (played by Raj Kapoor) owns a theatre company. For his new play, he wants to cast a girl who has qualities similar to her childhood love 'Nimmi'. He meets a Partition survivor- a girl (played by Nargis) who wishes to be the heroine of the play. On being asked her name, she responds by saying that she has no name. Similarly, themes of rootlessness may be found in many other films of the decade, especially the social flicks. Even if they did not refer to Partition directly, it can be easily deduced that Partition being the biggest scarcity of the contemporary times, it would have had set the mood in that fashion.

WOMEN'S QUESTION

Wars, armed and ethnic conflicts bode no good for anyone; but even among those affected directly- women and children are always the worst sufferers. They generally become the soft targets of vigilantes¹⁹. The Partition also saw some of the worst atrocities cast upon the womenfolk in particular. Women's sexuality, their 'recovery' and 'restoration' were at the centre of debates, but no effort was made to engage with their plight²⁰. It remained largely ignored in the official discourses and history writing of the period for many years. However, in the last three to four decades, many historians have tried to bring to the forefront the sorrowful stories of women. The lead in this regard has particularly been taken by women historians like Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon etcetera. They have insisted that how women's bodies themselves became a battleground, trophies and spoils of war. They were subjected to violence not only by the men of the 'other' community but also by their own families. They have outlined how sexual assaults on women were celebrated as a source of dishonouring the other community and how it led to similar episodes of inhumanity from the opposite side as well²¹.

Hindi cinema of the Nehruvian era seems to vacillate between the two ends of presenting the suffering which women faced during and after the period of Partition and wishful thinking that everything would become alright eventually. In one of the scenes of **Lahore (1949)**, the protagonist Chaman's friend- Ramesh meets her old love, Sarita. Having been kidnapped by some rioters earlier, she comes asking for his help, to which Ramesh refuses and instead berates her of having lost her chastity to some other man and of carrying a burden in her womb. Responding to his accusations, Sarita questions that how is it her mistake if someone else abducted and took her away and that the burden she is carrying is one of his own brothers (implicating a man) and in this way it is his own blood. Later on, Ramesh himself is shown to exploit a migrant woman Salma and it is only after Chaman's rightful intervention that he is able to realize his mistake. Another movie, **Apna Desh (1949)** directed by V. Shantaram narrates the story of a girl Mohini (played by Pushpa Hans) who gets separated from her family during Partition. She is kidnapped and raped by some rioters. After facing many adversities, she returns back to India only to find that her family and society are now unwilling to accept her in their midst. Determined to get revenge on society, she becomes a smuggler and gets into the black- marketing business- essentially working against the interest of the Nation. In one of the scenes where the protagonist- CID inspector Satish (played by Umesh Sharma) who is in love with Mohini and also ignorant of the fact that Mohini is the smuggler he has been searching for for a long time, wonders that how could a woman betray her own motherland! Objecting to it Mohini counters that he has no right to slanderize that woman until he is fully familiar with the context in which she took such a decision and what he is considering as a heinous crime may actually be good work in her eyes. She contends that the girl may be working

against her Nation in order to take revenge against something - one may perceive in this dialogue segment outpouring of the women's perspective; a question posed against the rigid boundaries of nationalities that had been recently drawn. Later, however, the climax unfolds in her accepting her crime, naming her co-conspirators and a happy ending of her meeting with her lover Satish. The final shot shows both of them saluting the National flag. Another important film to consider in this regard is **Chhalia (1960)** directed by Manmohan Desai; starring Raj Kapoor, Nutan, Pran and others. Shanti (played by Nutan) who got married to Kewal (played by Rehman) on the eve of Partition is left behind in Lahore, while her two families move to Delhi. She is forced to share a roof with Abdul Rehman (played by Pran), who has a sister of Shanti's age in India. When she returns back to India five years later with her son, she is first welcomed by his husband with open arms, but who later disowns her when he comes to know that the child identifies himself as Anwar, and his father as Abdul Rehman. Shanti tries to explain that it all happened because of the difficult circumstances that she had to face. She assures him of her chastity and that the child was Kewal's own, but he doesn't listen. Even her own father refused to give her shelter. Physically and emotionally shattered, Shanti tries to commit suicide after leaving Anwar in a remand home, but is rescued by Chhalia (played by Raj Kapoor). Meanwhile, Rehman lands in Delhi in search of Chhalia, with whom he has some old grudge. In another segment, it is shown that Kewal is moved by his son's emotions and is ready to accept him, while still refusing to accept Shanti as his wife. In the climax scene, set amidst a Dussehra festival, Chhalia is able to bring about a rapprochement between the estranged couple, and himself leaves the place, while Rehman is reunited with his sister on the return train. The film ends on a happy note and a wistful optimism that things would eventually get better, that people would be able to forget the madness of Partition and would accept their loved ones.

As mentioned above, this period of reluctance and disquiet was not completely silent as such. It may be noted from the themes and films outlined above that the directors (many of whom were themselves Partition survivors or had observed it unfold very closely) tried to tell the horrors of Partition in their own specific ways. However, they were either criticized for being very outrageous (as in the case of *Apna Desh*) or they tried to fit it within the narrative of the popular Nationalist sentiment, seeming less concerned to depict the pangs of the people, their miseries on the screen (something which the Bengali film directors did). Another thing to be noted here is that filmmaking is a cost-plus exercise. Right from arranging for shooting locations, cameras, the props, costumes, makeup to paying actors and the crew members for their services and arranging for distribution rights and premiere- it's a capital-intensive exercise, involving huge investments, especially if it has been made for a mass audience. Eventually, it's a business, where producers expect to reap good profits in return for the investments that they make²². One thus cannot work only on the basis of sentiments here. At the end of the day, the directors and producers are forced to face the demand and supply conundrum. In such a situation, the mainstream Cinema aligns itself along with the sensibilities and demands of the people. It is only by attracting people to watch your films, can one expect to reap benefits out of it. So, if people would have shown more enthusiasm in these films, then many other directors would also have tried to experiment with this subject. However, it is known that all of these films either tanked at the box office or were able to do nominal business only. This certainly would have had a frustrating influence upon anyone, who would have even thought of venturing in this direction.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion, we can conclude that Cinema as a medium of discourse in India was caught up in the nationalistic imagination. In the post-independence/partition era, it slowly came to adjust itself to the specific demands of promoting Nationalism, helping in building of a Nation and yet trying to depict the realities of the day, such as the issue of

Partition; which many a time even stood in derogation of the official narrative being popularised. Focussing on Hindi Cinema, in particular, we came to know that during the early two decades post-Partition, it was relatively dormant not only in picking up the issue of Partition and portraying it on the screen, but also in terms of unearthing the humanistic element associated with it; and yet this silence was never complete. Devices and figurations were formulated to refer to these ideas and sensibilities, which could not have been directly out presented. We thus need to evaluate these films in the specific circumstances of the period and other elements associated with the practice of filmmaking.

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